

# Black English

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(modified for electronic text)

Reflecting a linguistic heritage from Africa and Europe as well as a history of slavery and separation in the United States, Black English is a fully formed linguistic system operating parallel to standard American English. Like other varieties of the language, Black English has its own set of grammatical and phonological rules as well as a special lexicon and rhetorical style to give it a unique character.

An artifact not of race but of a speech community, Black English originated as a pidgin that the slaves (coming from a variety of language backgrounds) used to communicate among themselves. Over the years, the pidgin evolved into a Creole as more English words and structures were substituted for the West African terms to facilitate communication between slave and master. With emancipation in 1863, African Americans gradually entered the mainstream of American life and the Black English Creole began to lose some of its distinctive structural features.

Today it is estimated that between 60-80 percent of all African Americans speak a variety of Black English at least some of the time. (Story of English, 1986. Washington D.C.: Public Broadcasting System) Many speak it as their only dialect while others shift codes from Black English to Standard English as appropriate for the social setting or situation. Some African Americans speak only in Standard English because their socio- economic and psychological ties are not restricted to their ethnic community.

But Black English is more than a mere expression of ethnicity; it is a vitalizing element within the broader American speech community. In the music of Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin, the films by Spike Lee, the writing by Toni Morrison and Rita Dove, and electrifying oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson, the rich oral tradition of the black community is there to be appreciated by all.

As all language undergoes change, some of the grammatical and phonological features that distinguished Black English are no longer as prominent today as they once were. In listing these features, it is important to recognize that their occurrence is variable, subject to linguistic environment, social setting, and attention to speech. Some features of Black English present in the readings are:

- Omission of the copula be in contracted forms 's 're: He quick in everything. You out of the game.
- Be inclusion: The base form of be may be included to indicate habitual aspect or future time: They be slow all the time. The boy be here soon.
- Multiple negation: There ain't nothing the matter. They can't hardly wait (negative verb with negative adverb).
- Repetition of noun subject with pronoun: Miss Nellie, she pointed. Shelby, he told us.

- Question patterns without do: What he want?
- Completive aspect with done: Completed past action can be signaled by [done + Ved]:  
You done gone and bought your grandmother a hat? So many people had done named me different names.
- Use of ain't: Common to other standard varieties of English ain't is used as the negative form for is, are, am, and the auxiliaries have and has.